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ABSTRACT

The value of a college-level interdisciplinary American studies curriculum is examined in this paper. American studies offers the student a chance to fashion a desirable course of study for himself from various disciplines. It can produce the goal of the best traditional liberal-arts curriculum--the educated imagination. In a time when academic specialization poses a bewildering number of options, the American studies courses are some of the best tools for providing a general knowledge of culture in the curriculum. The programs will also allow students to build into their course of studies the skills in technology, business, and science demanded by today's job market. It presents a means of modifying and adopting traditional subjects to a more career-centered curriculum. The programs need not cost much since they require only interested administrators and teachers who are willing to attempt an interdisciplinary approach to education. (DE)

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American Studies and American History

(An address to a working session of the Third Meeting of the Georgia Association of Historians. Savannah, April 3, 1976.)

by

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It is a great pleasure to address you today on the relation of American Studies to American History and the possibility for successful interaction between these fields. Professors James Gay and James Dahl have tried for such an interaction at West Georgia College. Professor Gay will present the result of their attempts in American Studies there. Utilizing a chronological approach, they and their students analyzed American culture from the Civil War to the present. Whatever the problems and shortcomings of their approach, American Studies scholars must applaud their efforts.

Today I will be concerned with the general state of interdisciplinary studies, American Studies in particular. Interdisciplinary studies programs are academically "in." But the question that ought to affect us as historians is, what opportunities and challenges do these programs present to the learning and practice of our discipline? That these programs are "in" surely no one will deny. In February, 1975, the National American Studies Faculty, at the request of the Georgia Consortium for the Humanities, descended en masse on an assemblage of Georgia University System faculty and administrators gathered at Athens. The Faculty sent down its first team. Dr. John Hague, the Director, was there. Dr. Doris Friedensohn, Dean at Jersey City State College and now Vice President-elect of the American Studies Association, attended. Professor John William Ward (no mean historian or American culture scholar he!) keynoted the meeting. The assemblage was warmly welcomed by Vice Chancellor Eidson. For two days the

assembled scholars heard tales of curriculum design, of personal intellectual discoveries, and of struggles to persuade sometimes hesitant, if not belligerent, administrators. A parade of programs - American Studies, Women's Studies, Popular Culture Studies, Afro-American Studies, Chicano Studies, and Gay Studies - marched by. I was impressed. I was overwhelmed. I was numb.

It is my firm belief that interdisciplinary studies and American Studies are ideas whose time has come for 2 reasons. First, I believe that American Studies offers the student a chance to fashion a desirable course of study for himself from the various options offered by the conventional specialized fields of study. American Studies programs can produce a "general" education in the best sense. They can help to produce the goal of the traditional liberal arts curriculum - the educated imagination. Second, programs in American Studies will allow students to build into their course of studies the skills in technology, business, and science demanded by today's job market. The job lists of the Modern Language Association and the American Historical Association attest to the sad fact that scholars are an overabundant species. No longer can the performance of undergraduates be assessed (if ever it could accurately) with an eye to future performance in graduate school. In short, American Studies programs can produce an education that is both useful and relevant in the best sense.

To some scholars, American Studies may seem to be the last refuge of the diletante. For years American Studies scholars pondered literary scholar Edwin Cady's charge to name a

significant American Studies book that could not have been written by a scholar in a more conventional program. For years historian Stow Persons used to ask candidates what was the "unique" American Studies character of their dissertation. (Oh, but that they had possessed the moral fiber to be true historians!) This attitude reminds one of the story of the man who, when ill with a cold, was told by his doctor to take a hot bath, some aspirin, and get some rest. The next day the physician met his patient again and he looked no better. When questioned if he was following the doctor's orders, the patient answered that he hadn't even finished drinking the hot bath let alone taken the aspirin. If before writing on a given subject, one had to duplicate the qualifications of other writers, nothing would get written.

American Studies might be justly categorized as a method in search of a theory. Since its birth at Harvard in 1936 it has been a very self-conscious discipline. In its search for its one method, some fine writing on critical theory in the various branches of the humanities has been produced. Recent books by scholars like Gene Wise (American Historical Explanations and Cecil Tate (The Search for a Method in American Studies) attest to this. The August issue of the American Quarterly normally contains an assessment of the state of the craft, and I would submit that the quality of the writing in the American Quarterly, American Studies, the Journal of Popular Culture, and other publications at least partially answers Professor Cady's challenge.

Also, it seems more difficult with the growth of psychohistory and the psychology and sociology of the various branches of the humanities to identify a scholar or his work in terms of a home discipline. It may be a more important task to ask not whether a scholar of a different sort could have performed a given task but rather does the problem deserve to be worked on and is this person acquiring the academic skills needed to work it? In such a framework the cross fertilization of conventional and interdisciplinary studies programs like American Studies seems obvious. Also apparent is the relationship between interdisciplinary or horizontal, discipline - sharing approaches like American Studies and vertical, conventional disciplines like literature and history. How can you write of the sociology of a nation's literature without knowing that literature over time? How can you ask questions about what a culture valued unless you know what took place within it, unless you know its history?

While the National American Studies Faculty overwhelmed their audience with a diversity of programs and while I have made additional comments on interdisciplinary studies, you may wish to ask what shape an American Studies program ought to take. One could copy the chronological approach of Professors Gay and Dahl at West Georgia College. One could choose a thematic approach like the course on Man and Technology at Southern Tech. One could emulate the attempt at formulating a metalanguage for the social sciences being carried out at San Francisco State. The University of Pennsylvania offers a

program strong in cultural anthropology. A Deweyesque, problem-solving approach pervades the curriculum at the University of California at Davis. At Yale and Harvard the interdisciplinary period concentrates on the dissertation. At the University of Iowa you stand for examination in four fields; at Bowling Green the number is five. One of the most individualized programs is to be found at the graduate level in Emory's Institute of Liberal Arts. There are seemingly as many programs as there are approaches. As in the conventional disciplines, integration is as much a product of faculty and student input as it is of program structure.

At the advanced level, it seems imperative that American Studies be approached from the position of the skills the student will need to solve the problems he wishes to work on. If, despite the gloomy picture of the job lists, the student of American Studies wishes to pursue a career as a teacher-scholar it is necessary that he be equipped with a background which will allow him to take part in the community of academic discourse and with the necessary knowledge of a subject matter that will allow him to teach at the college level.

Some may, with justifiable curiosity, raise the question of what new programs would cost. They need not cost very much at all. The program at Purdue University ran for years out of a single office and one file cabinet and did not necessitate the hiring of any additional support staff. Administrators who are willing to take interdisciplinary programs seriously and faculty who are willing to serve on program steering

committees and not afraid to let students know that they do not know everything about every discipline are most important than monetary expenditures and expanded scholarly resources.

If I had to sum up my advice on American Studies for the benefit of my colleagues in the GAH who are full time historians, that advice would be two words: the first is dymaxionization and the second is eiconics, for these two words seem to sum up what a good deal of the thrust of interdisciplinary studies is all about. I have borrowed dymaxionization from the guru of the geodesic dome, Buckminster Fuller. It simply means doing more with less. American Studies seems to be one way in which a sound general education (yet one which can be modified to meet economic necessities) can be achieved. In an age when it is often seriously suggested that there be a moratorium on specialized scholarly writing, this way would be a sociable way to impart a familiarity with branches of academic knowledge and the concept of culture at the same time. The second term, eciconics, is borrowed from Kenneth Boulding and refers to the ability to perceive the images that men construct to construct, order, and rule themselves. In a time when academic specialization poses a bewildering number of intellectual options, American Studies and other interdisciplinary studies offer a way to produce an educated imagination, the mind, which is familiar with the various whys and hows of knowledge and also with enough of the "what" to make the other questions understandable.

Yet the most fascinating question of this session goes beyond this particular conference. What is to be the future of interdisciplinary studies in Georgia? That Georgia has one of the best geographic distributions of higher educational institutions is unquestionable. That there are major research libraries is apparent. That there is a community of scholars interested in communicating with each other is borne out by the very existence of the Georgia Association of Historians. Georgia is also the center of regional subcultures, traditions, and history. Would it be possible for American Studies scholars to meet with the GAH on a regular basis? Will American Studies grow in this center of the South as it has in other sections of the country? Only the faculties and administrators of Georgia can answer.